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United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

Culture of peace

Elimination of racism and racial discrimination

Letter dated 18 May 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I wish to draw your attention to some shocking statements made recently by the President of Syria, Bashar Al-Assad, and other high-ranking Syrian officials.

On the occasion of the recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Syria, the Syrian President delivered an anti-Semitic diatribe at the welcoming ceremony held at the Damascus airport on 5 May 2001. In his speech, President Assad denounced the "treacherous Jewish mentality" and accused the Jewish people of killing the principles of the divine faiths, of betraying and torturing Jesus Christ, and of committing treachery against the Prophet Muhammad. He further encouraged Christians and Muslims to make common cause against the Jews. Two days earlier, on 3 May 2001, during an official visit to Spain, President Assad justified an earlier comparison he had made in which he asserted that Israel was even more racist than the Nazis.

Other Syrian officials went even further. The Minister of Defence, Mustapha Tlass, stated on LBC television on 5 May 2001 that if "every Arab killed a Jew, no Jews would remain", and that he wanted "to kill any Jew he faced". The Syrian Grand Mufti blamed Israel for damaging mosques and carrying out "barbaric massacres" in a statement carried on Damascus Radio on 6 May 2001.

These statements, and scores of others made recently by various Syrian officials and religious figures, represent the vilest form of racism and anti-Semitism. Such incitement is fundamentally opposed to the Charter of the United Nations as well as to the basic principles of the peace process. President Assad's outrageous claims are an affront to the Jewish tradition — the oldest of the three great monotheistic faiths — and serve to reinforce his reputation for irresponsible and inflammatory leadership.

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Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism — two terms that are distinct yet hardly different — have scarcely been confined to Syria; the use of vicious propaganda and incitement against Israel exist in some other Arab States as well. Particularly disturbing is the revival of stereotypical Jewish caricatures, reminiscent of the anti-Semitic Nazi publication *Der Sturmer* ("The Attacker"), as well as of the ancient slander known as the "blood libel", whereby Jews were falsely accused of using the blood of non-Jews to bake matzah for the holiday of Passover.

Even in the United Nations, there has been a renewal of the type of anti-Zionist rhetoric we had hoped had been eliminated. The Deputy Permanent Representative of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Isa Ayad Babaa, speaking before the Security Council on 15 March 2001, equated the practices of the Israel Defence Forces with those of the Nazis. During that same meeting, the Permanent Representative of Iraq called Zionism a "racist creed".

These are but a small sample of the scores of statements made in newspapers, and on the radio and television, which set forth racist notions of the Jewish people and recall the darkest period of Jewish history in Europe. The word "anti-Semitism" itself was coined in 1879 by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr to designate the anti-Jewish campaigns under way in central Europe at that time and has since come to refer to any manner of hostility towards or discrimination against Jews as a group. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the great catastrophe perpetrated against the Jewish people in the last century began with defamation. A more recent manifestation is the alarming number of violent anti-Semitic acts against Jews and Jewish institutions around the world that have increased in concert with the pitch of anti-Semitic rhetoric worldwide.

As the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization states in its preamble, "wars begin in the minds of men". By the same token, racism, racial discrimination, religious intolerance, prejudice and bigotry also start in the minds of men. Consequently, racist verbal violence cannot and should not be dismissed as inconsequential: racist physical violence has invariably been preceded by racist verbal violence. Particularly with regard to anti-Semitism, the fallacious distinction between words and actions is demonstrably inapplicable.

In particular, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the contemptible role of Palestinian media incitement, as well as to the hate education and demonizing of Israelis and Jews that takes place in Palestinian educational institutions, in agitating the population and impelling it to violence. The anti-Semitic incidents that have occurred in France, Belgium, Britain, Germany and elsewhere cannot be divorced from the campaign of horror propaganda orchestrated against Israel and the Jewish people, a campaign that has played a pivotal role in creating the atmosphere in which such intolerable attacks can be conceived and executed.

As an Organization that was created in the wake of the horrific genocide of the Nazi Holocaust, and that is charged with ensuring that such heinous crimes do not recur, the United Nations, in keeping with its mandate as delineated in its Charter, must loudly condemn the rising global scourge of anti-Semitism. In particular, when such abominable language is uttered in the halls of the United Nations itself, this serves only to degrade the Organization and the purposes and principles enshrined in its Charter. It is essential that the ugly and vicious anti-Semitic rhetoric at the United Nations and elsewhere be confronted without delay, in a firm and unambiguous manner.

I also wish to take this opportunity to appeal to you to utilize your moral authority and denounce anti-Semitic rhetoric from whichever sectors it originates.

I should be grateful if you would arrange to have the text of the present letter circulated as a document of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly, under items 37, 40 and 130 of the preliminary list.

(*Signed*) Yehuda **Lancry**
Permanent Representative